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WASHINGTON TIMES
3 March 1987

White House scrambling to fill top CIA post

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By Bill Gertz
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The abrupt withdrawal of Robert Gates as the president's choice to head the CIA left the White House scrambling yesterday to find a replacement to run the nation's spy agency.

President Reagan's new chief of staff, Howard Baker, said the search was "an urgent item" but by the end of the day a new nominee had not been announced.

"No choice has been made by the president as of this moment," Mr. Baker said. "We hope to have a name to submit very soon indeed. Certain contacts are still under way and whether they mature into acceptance or turndown I cannot say, but we do not yet have an acceptance."

Leading the list of possible choices are former Sen. John Tower, whose three-man board last week released a report highly critical of the administration's handling of the Iran arms-sales operation.

Fellow commission member Brent Scowcroft, a former national security adviser, also has been mentioned, along with FBI Director William Webster, administration and congressional sources said.

Other prospective candidates include: retired Adm. Bobby Ray Inman, a former CIA deputy director; National Security Agency Director Lt. Gen. William Odom; former National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski; Sen. Malcolm Wallop, Wyoming Republican and a former intelligence panel subcommittee chairman; and John McMahon, Mr. Gates' predecessor as deputy CIA director.

Mr. Gates was nominated to the CIA post Feb. 2, when William Casey resigned after undergoing surgery to remove a cancerous brain tumor. The CIA issued a statement clarifying Mr. Gates' withdrawal and asserting that "no one asked him to withdraw his nomination." Nevertheless, his action saved Mr. Reagan the embarrassment of dropping his nomination.

"The president never wavered in his support," CIA spokeswoman Kathy Pherson said. "Mr. Gates considers it imperative the nation get on with its business. He believes that would not have been possible while the nomination was pending." She said Mr. Gates intends to remain as the agency's deputy director.

The announcement was delayed several times yesterday, fueling speculation that a replacement for Mr. Gates could not be found.

Reached by telephone yesterday, Mr. Webster said he had not been approached by White House officials about the CIA director's job.

"At this point, it is pure speculation," Mr. Webster said. "I can only say I have not been approached."

Asked whether he would accept the post if it were offered, Mr. Webster said, "I would have to think seriously about it." A former federal judge, Mr. Webster's term as FBI director expires next year.

One senior FBI official, who asked not to be identified, said it was "business as usual" for Mr. Webster throughout most of yesterday, "and you would think that if he was seriously being considered [by the White House] for the post there would have been at least two or three phone calls [from the White House], which there hasn't been.

"I don't think their arrow points over here," the official said.

Adm. Inman, now an electronic industry executive, said last night that "under no circumstances" would he accept the post and he expressed bitterness at the way Mr. Gates' nomination was handled.

"They can save themselves the phone call," he said in an interview. "The handling of the whole Gates thing just sort of caps it."

Mr. Gates, a career analyst and Soviet affairs specialist, became acting chief in December after Mr. Casey, the CIA director since 1981, became ill. Mr.Casey was released from Georgetown University hospital Saturday.

Mr. Gates was questioned by the Senate Intelligence Committee during two days of often stormy confirmation hearings last month. The committee grilled Mr. Gates about his role in preparing analyses on Iran as deputy CIA intelligence director, and later as the agency's No. 2 man.

The panel also questioned Mr. Gates about why he did not take action quicklyto alert senior officials about the possible diversion of funds from the Iran arms sales to the Nicaraguan resistance when it first surfaced Oct. 1.

Committee Chairman David Boren, Oklahoma Democrat, and Vice Chairman William Cohen, Maine Republican, yesterday released a statement praising Mr. Gates for his decision.

"It would not be good for the country to leave a critical department like the CIA adrift with only an acting director for a prolonged period of time," the senators said. "It became clear that pursuing the nomination of Robert Gates would have only extended the period during which the CIA would be without permanent leadership."

The senators said Mr. Gates should be commended for putting the interests of the country above his own personal good, "by standing aside so a permanent director could be put in place more quickly."

Mr. Nunn told reporters he thinks there are at least a half-dozen people in and out of government who would excel as CIA director.

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